COP OR FARMER: WHICH JOB IS SAFER?

Tells the Facts and Names the Names

CounterPunch

$2.50

JULY 16-30, 1999 | *Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair* | VOL. 6, NO. 14

■ IN THIS ISSUE

BLOOD, SWEAT AND POISON

- IBP Runs Its Line So Fast that Live Cows are Cut Up and Workers Have to Pee in Their Pants
- A Texas Company Sells Toxic Disinfectants to Indian Kids (Execs May Face Jail Time)

WOLVES AND MINES

- Montana's Dark Side
- Prisons Put Under Airbases to Punish the Inmates
- Jimmy Carter's Wheat

OUR LITTLE SECRETS

- Nato's War Crime Pledge: The Bigger the Better
- Dumb Kennedys
- Mad Mag's Gaines on Bad Taste

Inside Big Meat

All is not well at the IBP Inc. plant in Pasco, Washington, one of the nation's biggest slaughterhouses. Workers tell us meat at the plant is routinely contaminated with cow shit because on the processing line they're not given enough time to wash their hands. There's unrelenting speed up pressure from plant managers. Meat that falls on the floor, which is itself often littered with meat byproducts and entrails, is often thrown back on the line without being cleaned off. Cutting tools and conveyor belts, workers tell CounterPunch, are also regularly coated with pus from abcesses and tumors that haven't been properly cut out of the meat. Meat cutters at the plant also tell us that often cows are not killed or even stunned before being sent down the line. Instead, workers say they often hear cows bellowing in agony as they are skinned and dismembered alive.

Such horrors stem from the excessive speed of the meat processing line, a complex and dangerous network of conveyor belts and overhead chains and hooks. "They keep that line moving as fast as possible and they don't want it stopped for any reason," an IBP worker tells us. "They don't care about the cows or the cow shit on the meat. They've got quotas to meet."

Nor does IBP give workers adequate breaks. The company cheats them out of pay for the 30 minutes a day it takes to put on and remove the protective clothing, glasses and gloves they must wear to work the cutting line. Union shop steward (UFCW) Maria Martinez says many workers are often denied bathroom breaks, forcing them to urinate in their pants so they won't fall behind.

The workers are well aware that when they fall behind they risk being fired. Early in the morning on June 4, IBP managers yanked a meat cutter from the cutting line, saying that he wasn't keeping up with the flow of the meat. When his fellow workers saw him being taken away, twenty of them followed him to the plant manager's office. Many of them brought their knives with them. The production line came to a halt.

The workers told the manager that all of them were having problems doing their jobs safely. "The velocity of the machines was so fast, we couldn't work properly", says Malquiadez Perez, another shop steward. But the managers didn't want to hear any of this. The meat cutters were told that they had 60 seconds to return to their places on the line or they would be fired on the spot.

Maria Martinez responded that the group would go back to work if all of them could return, including the meat cutter who had been fired for not keeping up with the pace of the line. The manager told Martinez no, demanded that the workers turn over their knives and that they were fired.

This action led 800 other workers at the plant to walk off the job as well, carrying their knives with them. The action effectively shut down the slaughterhouse. On June 8, the union voted to go on strike.

The strike was settled on July 7, when workers narrowly approved a new contract on a 276-258 vote. Under the terms of the deal, union members will be given a say in the composition of the plant's safety committee and wages for most workers will be upped by $1.32 an hour. But many union leaders opposed the contract, saying it failed to address the key issues that prompted the walk out.

"This strike was never about money," says Maria Martinez. "It was about worker safety and consumer protection. And we didn't get what we were fighting for."

But the story is not over yet. In re-

(**Big Meat** *continued on page 6*)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Our Little Secrets

Poisoned Toothbrushes

In 1996 more than 100 Indian children on the Lakota Sioux reservation in Rosebud, South Dakota started having nosebleeds, stomach cramps, headaches, unusual forms of tooth decay and blisters on their mouths. It turns out the children, all of whom had attended the tribe's Head Start program, had been brushing their teeth every day with toxic toothbrushes.

Between November of 1995 and March of 1997, an Irving, Texas company called Friendly Systems had sold the tribe three shipments of a chemical disinfectant it said was safe to use on toothbrushes and silverware. According to the tribe's Head Start officer, a saleswoman from Friendly Systems called the product effective, harmless and environmentally friendly.

The active ingredients in the toothbrush disinfectants are Tisan and DDS-164. According to EPA guidelines, the chemicals are approved for sterilizing floors, machinery and urinals. But the chemicals are not sanctioned for cleaning toothbrushes and they are not deemed safe for human consumption. Friendly Systems apparently found itself with a glut of these chemicals and decided to unload them on the unsuspecting Sioux.

Editors
Alexander Cockburn
Jeffrey St. Clair

Design
Deborah Thomas

Counselor
Ben Sonnenberg

Published twice monthly except August, 22 issues a year:
$40 individuals,
$100 institutions,
$30 student/low-income
CounterPunch.
All rights reserved.
CounterPunch welcomes all tips.
CounterPunch
3220 N. St., NW, PMB 346
Washington, DC, 20007-2829
1-800-840-3683 (phone)
1-800-967-3620 (fax)
www.counterpunch.org

Indian reservations have long been dumping grounds for defective and hazardous products. This time federal prosecutors took the company to court. During the trial, Friendly Systems argued that the government hadn't proved that there was a "substantial difference" between pesticides used to clean floors and disinfectants. It took the jury less than two hours to dispose of this argument and return a guilty verdict. Now the company faces $600,000 in criminal fines, civil sanctions and possible jail time for its officers.

Those Kennedys...

The Kennedys never did have sense. Brad Hatch, a friend of CounterPunch, sends us this interesting account of John's uncle Bobby. Hatch's father and grandfather ran an outfit called Hatch River Expeditions. Brad's dad told him that in the 1960s Robert Kennedy and his family ran river trips with the company.

"On one trip through the Grand Canyon, Bobby all of a sudden decided that he wanted to ride an air mattress through the next rapid. My father told him to stay in the boat, telling him it was too dangerous. Bobby told my father, 'Don, you're not going to tell me what to do', and went ahead and ran the rapid in the air mattress. No commoner was going to tell him what to do, even if he was one of the country's foremost experts on rivers and whitewater rafting. My father dragged him out of the water below the rapid. Bobby was spitting up water and was exhausted. I think that his attitude of defiance and risk-taking has something to do with the so-called 'Kennedy curse'.

"I find it hard to get too upset about the loss of another Kennedy who dies because he used poor judgment.

"The company name was Hatch River Expeditions. My father and grandfather were the ones who took Martin Litton and many other Sierra Club members down the Green River to show them what would be lost if the Echo Park Dam was put in.

"Keep in mind that I was not a witness to what happened. I've just heard about the stories from my father, his wife and other boatmen on the trip. They all talked about how arrogant and demanding the Kennedys and their friends were. Most of them said that they would not want to run with them ever again. Bobby demanded to have hot water for his bath every night, a request my father refused to do."

Back to School

Nabbed back in March for speeding in his 1964 station wagon ("I didn't think this old wreck would go that fast," the Highway Patrol Officer said sarcastically as he wrote him up for a 78 mph violation) the CounterPunch coeditor finally made it to traffic school last week. Under California law you can thus shield your rashness from the insurance companies, provided there's at least an 18-month interval from your last citation.

His last class in Berkeley a couple of years ago was run by a former alcoholic who underwent visible nervous breakdown throughout the eight-hour session, said break-down prompted by anecdotes about his daughter's driving skills and her indifference to her father. As he issued the certificates he tearfully thanked the class for "sharing".

The class in Eureka last week was run by a former cop from San Diego, who divides his time between running a driving school and representing tax deadbeats before the IRS. He offered a torrent of statistics. The most dangerous time to drive: Friday evening, closely followed by Saturday night, closely followed by Sunday night. The safest day is Tuesday. The last 24-hour period in California in which no one was killed on the roads was on May 1, 1991 (which turns out to have been a Wednesday).

Amid this deluge of numbers he paused to review the best way to deal with the officer as he approaches your car. It's best, he said, to have your hands up on the wheel. In Cockburn's case, he was groping under the seat for his registration, and when the itchy young officer asked that he lean over and lower the passenger window, the handle came off in his hand. The instructor plunged into cop's-eye view about what it was like to approach a car. Death could be waiting. There was no job, he told the class, more perilous than that of the police officer.

Cockburn told him he didn't think this claim was true; told him that in fact police work is among the safer occupations, that the likelihood of being killed in the line of duty is exceedingly slim. If you tot up the numbers of local police, sheriffs'

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

deputies, state police, "special police" (a mysterious category in the U.S. Statistical Abstract) and all sworn officers both full- and part-time, the total in 1993 was 661,103. The total of police killed accidentally and feloniously in that year across the country was 129, which seems to be about average in any year. This gives a death rate per 100,000 cops of 20, most of whom are probably killed in car crashes. The rate of death per 100,000 in coal mining was 38 in 1995, making it the riskiest job, followed by other forms of mining (25), oil and gas extraction (23), agriculture, forestry and fishing (22). If cops walked more and drove less, they'd probably halve their death rate, putting them on par with people in the electrical, gas and sanitary services, at eight or so per 100,000.

The big disclosure of the evening is that the American Psychiatric Association is putting "road rage" in its next edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, meaning that this nebulous category has now been okayed by shrinks as a bona fide condition, amenable to treatment by anti-depressants and kindred potions. Having made "road rage" official, the shrinks can now begin to coin money off it.

The benefits of the traffic class? Cockburn drove home carefully, 60 miles across the mountains, mindful of one particular admonition of the instructor, later confirmed by California's Fish and Game department. If he struck a bear, tied it to the roof of his car, got it home undetected and was later tempted to sell three or more parts of its anatomy—the gallbladder is particularly esteemed by Asians for medical reasons—he would be liable to at least a year in prison for a felony, plus $10,000 fine. Bear poachers beware.

Harder Next Time

An end to any pretense that bombs are aimed at military targets is disclosed in what is described by Tim Butcher and Patrick Bishop of the London Daily Telegraph as "a private preliminary review by NATO experts" of the 78-day Allied Force bombing campaign against Serbia.

The report apparently concludes that the bombing campaign had "almost no military effect", that "despite thousands of bombing sorties, they failed to damage the Yugoslav army tactically in Kosovo". NATO's current assessment is that only a handful of tanks, guns and armored personnel carriers were damaged.

Police work is one of the safer occupations. There's slim chance of getting killed.

The NATO report also concludes that it was a big mistake to have opened the campaign with bombs that wreaked little havoc but firmed up civilian morale. In the chilling words of The Telegraph the NATO report intimates that "Any future operation by NATO is likelier to involve heavier, more ruthless attacks on civilian targets such as power stations and water treatment plants at an earlier stage of the campaign."

Recall that the Geneva Convention of 1949 prohibits bombing of any target that has a civilian function. NATO's strategists are now concluding that the only point of bombing is to destroy civilian-related infrastructure. So, the Clinton-Albright war prompted at its onset the slaughter of thousands of Kosovars by the Serbs, the flight or expulsion of hundreds of thousands more, the killing via bomb and missile of nearly 2000 Yugoslav civilians, the destruction of Serbia's economy, the ruin of the Danube river trade plus environmental catastrophe. And NATO says that next time it will try to make it all a lot worse.

The Horror, The Horror

Back in the age of innocence, in the 1950s, kids could order up their firepower out of catalogs and you'd see students heading to school on bus or subway, toting guns they'd be using later that day in ROTC sessions. No, back then parents fretted over horror comics and switchblades. Let little Albert dip his nose too deeply into the blood-drenched comics being put out by publishers such as William Gaines of MAD magazine fame, and he'd surely be set on the slippery slope of crime and slaughter.

In fact Gaines was hauled before a committee run by that tireless grandstander, Sen. Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, who also held famous hearings into racketeering and the mob. Here's an hilarious extract from the transcript of the committee's encounter with Gaines. It appears in Frank Jacobs' The Mad World of William M. Gaines, published by Bantam in 1972. Gaines is being questioned by Herbert Beaser, one of the committee's counsels:

Beaser: Is that the sole test of what you put in your magazines, whether it sells? Is there any limit of what you wouldn't put in your magazine because you thought a child shouldn't see or read about it?

Gaines: No, I wouldn't say there is any limit for the reason you outlined. My only limits are bounds of good taste. What I consider good taste.

Beaser (probing): Then you think a child cannot in any way, shape or manner, be hurt by anything that the child reads or sees?

Gaines: I do not believe so.

Beaser: (still probing): There would be no limit actually to what you'd put in magazines?

Gaines: Only within the bounds of good taste.

Kefauver (doubtful): Here is your May issue. This seems to be an arm with a bloody ax holding a woman's head up which has been severed from her body. Do you think that's in good taste?

Gaines: Yes, sir. I do, for the cover of a horror comic. A cover in bad taste, for example, might be defined as holding the head a little higher, so that the blood could be seen dripping from it, and moving the body over a little further so that the neck of the body could be seen to be bloody. (Murmurs, stirrings among spectators.)

Kefauver (still doubtful): You've got blood coming out of her mouth.

Gaines: A little.

Kefauver: And here's blood on the ax. I think most adults are shocked by that. Now here's a man with a woman in a boat and he's choking her to death with a crowbar. Is that in good taste?

Gaines: I think so.

Hancock: How could it be worse?

Hennings (coming to rescue): Mr. Chairman, I don't think it is really the function of our committee to argue with this gentleman.

Jacobs reports that Gaines more than held his own in the initial hours of testimony, but then faded abruptly, seeming harassed and defensive. The reason was that he'd ingested a bracing dose of Dexedrine, thinking he'd ride through the session on its coattails, only to find that the drug's effects had worn off abruptly, leaving him high and dry.

Lest You Forget

We don't publish CounterPunch in August. So look for your next issue around Labor Day. Stay out of trouble. ■

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CounterPunch Journeys

Montana High and Low

From time to time we'll be printing CounterPunch Journeys. Here's Jeffrey St. Clair's diary of a visit to Montana.

Like many other American writers, John Steinbeck was drawn to Montana. He described the allure of the Big Sky state in Travels with Charley: "I am in love with Montana. For other states I have admiration, respect, recognition, even some affection, but with Montana it is love and it's difficult to analyze love when you're in it. The scale is huge, but not overpowering, The land is rich with grass and color, and the mountains are the kind I would create if mountains were ever put on my agenda. Montana seems to me to be what a small boy would think Texas is like from hearing Texans." My sentiments are similar.

But Montana also has a dark side. I was here to see both. As field work for a book project on the mining industry, Larry Tuttle, who runs the Center for Environmental Equity in Portland, and I hit the road in late July to visit three mining sites: Zortman-Landusky next to the Ft. Belknap Reserveration in the Little Rockies; the old Iron Mike mine on the Continental Divide and the planned McDonald gold project along the Blackfoot River.

I flew from Portland into Great Falls, the Missouri River town at the base of the Rocky Mountain Front. The airport is large for a city this small. That's because it is connected to Malstrom Air Force Base, a command post for the nation's nuclear arsenal. The day I arrived the commander of the air base held a press conference pleading for a new generation of Minuteman missiles, "the old crop having gone out of date". In the West, airports and prisons often seem to be neighbors. The Great Falls prison is a shadeless compound situated next to Malstrom AFB, where prisoners, many of them Indians, endure the perpetual thunder of fighter jets and commercial airliners landing and taking off. The Air Force jets are coming in 24 hours a day, a flight every 20 minutes. It's difficult to imagine anyone getting used to the sound or being able to sleep through the night. That's why the prison was put there, according to Steve Leach, a prison rights activist in Billings. "Those overflights are considered a form of punishment."

Great Falls is an industrial town that bears the scars of the old Anaconda copper smelter that polluted the city for decades and dumped poisons and heavy metals into the Missouri. Even the falls, which caused Lewis and Clark some of their most anxious moments, are gone now, submerged beneath a series of useless dams erected by that most destructive of federal agencies, the Army Corps of Engineers.

As we pulled out of Great Falls onto Highway 89 north toward Ft. Benton, I picked up a copy of the Great Falls Tribune, one of America's best daily newspapers. The lead story was an all-too familiar one. The previous day federal animal killers with the USDA's ADC program tracked down three wolves on the Rocky Mountain Front near Choteau and shot them from a helicopter. Their crime: they were suspected of killing two lambs and injuring a calf. The killing operation cost more than $15,000. The lambs and calf were valued at less than $750. Two weeks earlier, three more wolves had been captured in the Bitterroot valley, south of Missoula, again for harassing sheep. One of the wolves died, apparently strangled to death by the government trapper. There's something terribly amiss here. These wolves' predations on livestock are minimal, and besides, through a fund administered by the Defenders of Wildlife, ranchers are fully compensated (at higher than current market value rate) for each cow or sheep killed by a grizzly or wolves.

So why kill the wolves, if the pressure isn't coming from the ranchers? It has little to do with economics and everything to do with politics. Bruce Babbitt wants to demonstrate that under his flexible administration of the Endangered Species Act predators that get out of hand will be given the death penalty. No questions asked; no quarter given. In the Ninemile Valley, north of Missoula, ranchers have come to look with pride and affection on the two packs denning on their lands. They feel protective of the wolves. One of them told me: "I'll be damned if I'll let the feds know where those pups are. Surest way for them to get killed."

There is another factor at work as well. The Clinton crowd would just as soon see the wolf and grizzly made the scapegoat for the economic problems of the ranchers, problems that are really the result of the trade policies pushed by the administration. The ranchers know this. George McClellan runs 1,500 cattle in the Kettle Range of eastern Washington, a fine-looking, clean operation. If anyone should be making a profit in this business, it's him. But he's about to sell out. Beef prices have tumbled since enactment of NAFTA and have never recovered. On top of that a monopoly exists in the meatpacking industry. "We've got only one place to sell our beef", McClellan says. "That's IBP. They tell you the price. You take it or leave it. Well, I worked my ass off last year and still lost $6,000." What's going to happen to this rangeland when people like McClellan give it up? Who's left: the big corps, ranchettes owned by Microsoft execs (complete with Lear jet landing strips), gated communities along trout streams and the slob rancher.

This is Blackfoot Country, land that once belonged to the most feared of the Indians of the northern plains. It's an austere, wind-battered terrain of rolling plains of short-grasses, pronghorn and cutthroat trout streams. It was by one of those streams, the Marias River, that the Plains Indian wars began, when Meriwether Lewis and part of his expedition stumbled across a Blackfoot encampment and shot their way out, killing a young Indian and wounding several others. The grizzlies used to wander down here from their mountain dens 60 miles to the west. Now the Blackfoot are mustered on a small reservation at Browning, the bears rarely venture past the boundries of Glacier Park and the landscape is covered with fields of wheat and alfafa and pock-marked by underground missile silos, the prairie-dogs of the nuclear age.

At the town of Havre Route 87 joins with Highway 2, the road they call the

"I'll be damned if I'll let the feds know where the pups are. Surest way for them to get killed."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

High Line. It parallels the Canadian border, running along side the sweeping meanders of the Milk River, past small marshes alive with frantic flights of killdeer plovers and yellow-headed blackbirds, and through railroad towns like Chinook, and Havre that haven't changed all that much in sixty years. Except for the neon profusion of casinos. The casinos and state-sponsored slots and video poker machines are one more blast at the Indians, who had just begun to see a new trickle of money find its way to them.

From Havre (pronounce 'have-her') the crumpled outline of the Bear Paw Mountains frames the southern horizon. We turned south at Malta, a town the mining industry claims as one of its dependents. It's hard to see where much of the benefits have trickled down. Malta looks just like all the other towns on the High Line, dusty, weather-scarred, economically depressed. As with Havre, Harlem, Zurich and Chinook, the biggest action seems to be at the grain elevators, which, a gas attendent tells me, "are holding wheat from back in the Carter administration. Keep it at 53 degrees and it'll stay forever."

Our destination is the Little Rocky Mountains, an island range that rises like a pod of humpback whales out of the Great Plains. The entrance to the Little Rockies rivals that of any national park. There are slot canyons, natural bridges, caves, rockshelters and towering walls of limestone. Most of the Little Rockies are part of the Ft. Belknap Indian Reservation, where the Assiniboin and Gros Ventre tribes were confined by Miles and his cronies in 1876. But the southern tip of the range was swindled from the Indians in the early 1900s when gold nuggets were found in some of the creeks. Pick-ax miners came and went over the next 70 years, then in 1979, Pegasus Gold, a Reno-based company, acquired the site, called Zortman-Landusky, and began to excavate the biggest open pit gold mine in Montana.

The top 1000 feet of two mountain peaks were sheared off and two 800-foot deep pits carved into the earth. The rock was crushed and placed on heap-leach pads, some of them more than 600 feet tall, then doused with a sodium cyanide solution. The sodium cyanide is purchased in 100-gallon barrels from DuPont, whose stake in the new chemical mining boom is largely hidden but very profitable. It is mixed with water and then sprayed on the

The top 1000 feet of two mountain peaks were cut off and two 800-foot deep pits carved into the earth.

mounds of crushed rock. The gold is leached out—at the rate of .12 ounces per ton. In theory, the cyanide-laced water drains into holding ponds. Despite the enormous size of the project, an environmental impact statement was never completed for the mine.

The mine went at it full blast for more than 15 years. The mine itself isn't on Indian lands and it employed few people from the Reservation, but since operations began it has forever altered the lives of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboin who live there. We went up Mission Creek Canyon, which cuts through the reservation from the small town of Hays back toward the mine. The gaping scar of the mine is visible from nearly every spot on the Rez, including the tribe's sundance site and it engulfs Mission Peak, a sacred site. Before the mine went in, Mission Creek was a world class trout stream. The fish began to die in the mid-1980s. "We found them floating belly up, hundreds of them," says Joe Azure, of Red Thunder. "We took them to a toxicologist and found they were loaded with toxins and heavy metals from the mine."

The Indians mobilized against Pegasus, joining forces with anti-mining organizers Jim Jensen and Will Patric to oppose an expansion of the mine in 1994. Pegasus responded to the opposition by blackmail, threatening that if it wasn't allowed to dig another two pits it would halt operations entirely and fire its 280 workers. The strong-arm tactics worked. The Interior Department and the State of Montana both approved the expansion in 1996. The Indians and the enviros sued, but before a final decision could be reached the price of gold began its plunge. Pegasus shut down the mine and filed for bankruptcy protection. The mine-workers were laid off, but Pegasus's lawyers went before US Bankruptcy Judge Gregg Zive and asked for $5.5 million in bonuses for the company's top executives. The judge approved the request but reduced the amount to a cool $5 million. "We need to induce employees to continue working during difficult times", explained Pegasus's lawyer Mark Thompson. The execs (including the CEO) banked the money and quickly ran off to other firms.

Meanwhile, the big hole at Zortman-Landusky remains and it is leaking acid, arsenic, cyanide and other heavy metals. The cleanup of the site is now the responsibility of the state of Montana and its taxpayers. The price is estimated at more than $100 million, but most agree that won't begin to repair the damage.

From the Little Rockies we headed south into the Missouri Breaks, a labryinth of hidden canyons on the southern flank of a rare undammed stretch of the Missouri. Today, this region is part of the Charlie Russell National Wildlife Refuge. For those who've never been on a wildlife refuge in the West and wonder if you can actually see a lot of animals, the answer is yes: cows. Nearly every acre of most refuges are leased for grazing and the Russell was no different. For the next, 80 miles cows were our constant companion. Where ORVs and dirtbikes were prohibited in order to protect prairie dog colonies, cows were given free reign. As we left the refuge, we turned back for one last look at the Little Rockies a hundred miles to the north. Even from here the mine was visible, shining like a grim smile on the horizon. ■

SUBSCRIPTION INFO

Enter/Renew Subscription here:

One year individual, $40
One year institution, $100
One year student/low income, $30
Please send back issue(s)
_____ ($3/issue)
"I am enclosing a separate sheet for gift subscriptions"

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

_____

Payment must accompany order.
Add $10 for foreign subscriptions.
If you want CounterPunch emailed to you please supply your email address.
Make checks payable to: **CounterPunch.**
3220 N Street, NW, PMB 346
Washington, DC 20007-2829

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RETURNED TO SENDER NOT KNOWN IBM

sponse to a letter from Martinez and others, the USDA's Food Safety and Inspecition Service has opened a probe of IBP for possible violations of worker safety, meat quality and animal cruelty laws. The Humane Slaughter Act of 1958, for example, prohibits companies from butchering animals while they are conscious.

IBP denies all the charges against it. The Dakota Dunes, South Dakota-based company says that it recently installed a "steam vacuum system" that will "sanitize" the meat even if it becomes contaminated by feces and pus on the line. IBP claims that the June 4 walkout was a set up and had nothing to do with the dismissal of the meat cutter. Company flack Gary Mickelson says that the IBP security people had "picked up rumors the night before that the workers were planning an action the next day". Mickelson claims the entire affair "was staged by the union".

But this is far from the first time the $13 billion company has been accused of shoddy practices and worker safety violations. Indeed, since its founding in 1960 (then called Iowa Beef Packers), the company has gained a reputation as being hysterically anti-worker and quick to call in scabs and violent strikebreakers. In early 1969 the company closed down three Iowa plants, increased automation and tried to bust the United Food and Commercial Workers when the union demanded a 20 cents an hour pay raise for workers. The following year the Federal Trade Commission hit the company with an anti-trust suit, which prohibited IBP from acquiring any new plants in South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa or Nebraska. In consequence IBP invested in the Pasco plant in Washington and several others in the Pacific Northwest and Texas.

In 1972 IBP's founder and former CEO, Currier Holman, was convicted of paying a New York mob boss $1 million to insure that unions would not disrupt the distribution of IBP meat on the east coast. Further investigations for monopolistic practices followed after the company was acquired by Armand Hammer's Occidental Petroleum in 1981. In 1985 OSHA whacked IBP with a then-record $2.6 million fine for fixing data on the high rate of worker injuries at its plants. Of particular concern for OSHA was the design of IBP's cutting machines, which caused repetition motion disorders in hundreds of IBP workers.

After Hammer died in 1990, IBP was spun off in a public stock offering. Today, Archer-Daniels-Midland is IBP's biggest shareholder, owning more than 14 percent of the company. This didn't change the company's practices much, but the firm's cozy relationship with high level figures in Congress and the Clinton administration probably saves it from troublesome federal scrutiny. The IBP board hosts Wendy Gramm, wife of the appalling Texas senator and herself a powerful Washington player, and also JoAnn Smith, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Meat Inspection during the Bush presidency. Gramm and Smith have been lushly compensated at the tune of $30,000 for a week's worth of work for the company.

Although IBP claims that it pays its meat cutters for a full day's work, factory workers say that they must come in at 5:30 each morning to begin sharpening their knives and putting on the cumbersome gear, a half hour before the meat line cranks up. At the end of the day, another half-hour is spent cleaning up the work stations, gear and knives. The workers tell CounterPunch they are not paid for this time nor are they given two 10-minute breaks required by federal law for laborers who work more than an eight-hour day. IBP calculates the "official" workday at 7 hours and 56 minutes and claims it is only required to give the workers one 15-minute break and a half-hour lunch break in the grueling day. In 1997, the Tenth Circuit Court, in a suit brought by workers at a different plant, ruled that IBP was required to pay workers at that plant for the time spent putting on and off the cutting gear and preparing the knives and work stations. A similar suit was recently filed against IBP's Pasco factory.

Allegations about contaminated meat coming from IBP plants has put the company on the defensive, prompting it to invest heavily in a new PR campaign disguised as a "food safety initiative". On May 17, IBP spent $150,000 to start up the "Safeguarding Our Last Links Campaign", which will be run by the Food Marketing Institute, the meat industry's trade association. The Last Links campaign will not focus on the growing crisis of contamination in meat plants, but on teaching consumers how to keep meat "safely" stored in refrigerators and how to clean countertops and silverware. The campaign, IBP's CEO Robert Peterson said, is designed to "help consumers learn safe food handling practices". ■

CounterPunch
3220 N Street, NW, PMB 346
Washington, DC 20007-2829

Attention Subscribers: the number that appears above your name on the mailing label refers to the ISSUE NUMBER of CounterPunch after which your subscription expires, NOT the month. *Don't worry, this confuses everyone.*

~~Presorted~~
First Class Mail
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 269
Skokie, IL

First Class Mail

IAN BALDWIN
2400 N STREET NW
WASHINGTON DC 20037

374
8/13/99

Yes, They Poisoned Kids' Toothbrushes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED